

Economic and Political Crisis In Pakistan: Social Causes and Exit Opportunities

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Abstract. The article examines some of the underlying causes of the acute economic and political crisis that engulfed Pakistan in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Such features of Pakistani society as the dominance of large hereditary landowners and a narrow group of wealthy industrialists are noted, and the decisive role played by the military corporation in governing the state is emphasized. The consequence of conservative social policies and an ineffective leadership system was the country's increased dependence on international financial institutions and external assistance, as well as the accelerated lag of Pakistan from its neighbors in South Asia in economic and social development in the 21st century. It is concluded that there are no easy ways out of the crisis and that there are threats to the entire region as it deepens.

Keywords: Pakistan, current crisis, big landowners, industrialists, army, external aid

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Introduction

At the turn of the last decades, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan entered a period of deep economic and political crisis. One of the reasons was the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the first wave at the beginning of 2020, the second and third occurred. 2022 was marked by a terrible natural disaster: from June to September there were almost continuous torrential rains, causing extraordinary flooding. 33 million people were affected in a third of the country's territory (mainly in the southern province of Sindh), 8 million were forced to leave their homes, and about 2 thousand died. The pandemic and natural disasters have affected macroeconomic indicators. Gross domestic product growth in fiscal year 2019–20 (July to June) was negative (-0.9%). The growth rate for the next two years was estimated

by Pakistan's economic authorities to be high at 6%, but in 2022–23 the growth dropped to 0.3%, so that the average annual average for four years was below 3%, barely ahead of the ultra-high in modern times demographic growth rate of 2.6%. The value of real GDP in US dollars in 2022–23 decreased compared to the previous year from \$375 to 342 billion and was lower than in 2020–21 and even in 2017–18 (\$349 and 357 billion, respectively)¹

This jumping dynamics is associated with a steep drop in the exchange rate of the national currency (three times over the last 7 years – instead of 100 rupees per dollar, you now have to pay 300) and led to periodic severe depletion of the State Bank's foreign exchange reserves (to less than \$3–5 billion), chronic a budget deficit of 5–7% of GDP, an increase in external debt (up to a third of the national product) and a current account deficit, accelerating inflation, exorbitant increases in electricity tariffs, prices for gasoline, other fuels, for essential goods – flour, sugar, vegetable oil, etc.

Political instability was added to stagflation (stagnation + inflation). In March–April 2022, a government crisis erupted. After winning the 2018 elections, the Pakistan Justice Movement cabinet came to power, led by the charismatic leader Imran Khan, a former athlete and captain of the Pakistan national team in the country's most popular sport, cricket, which won the World Cup for the only time in 1992. Khan, educated at Oxford, switched to politics and became an idol of youth. Thanks to his personal popularity, his party was able to intervene in the struggle of two other parties that had long replaced each other on the political Olympus: the Pakistan Muslim League (N), where the letter denotes the name of its permanent leader Nawaz Sharif, and the Pakistan People's Party, associated with the names of those executed by the military authorities in 1979 by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Benazir, who twice served as head of government and was killed by Islamists in 2007. Imran's popularity did not save Imran from intrigue, a split in the ranks of his party and defeat in parliament. After he withdrew his confidence in the prime minister in early April 2022, a new government was formed led by opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif, the younger brother of Nawaz, who served as prime minister three times (1990–93, 1997–99 and 2013–17) and never completed the constitutionally allotted five-year term in this post. The reason for his early departure each time was disagreements with the army, the military bureaucracy, which is actually the corporation that governs the country. In August 2023, Sh. Sharif's cabinet resigned a few days before the expiration of the term of office of the parliament elected five years ago. In accordance with the constitution, power in the country passed into the hands of a transitional cabinet. Its functions include overseeing the conduct of "free and fair" elections within 90 days. Although the elections would therefore have been held in early November, this was prevented by the fact that legislators, before ending their powers, approved the results of the last census (digital), carried out in March–May 2023. The Election Commission postponed the elections until January 2024 on the grounds that it needs time to determine the new constituency boundaries according to the latest census data.

¹ Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23. Economic Adviser's Wing Finance Division Government of Pakistan Islamabad. Available from: [finance.gov.pk/survey/PES_2022_23.pdf](https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/PES_2022_23.pdf). Overview of the Economy:2–6. Statistical Appendix:3.

The economic situation in the country has not improved under the transitional government headed by Senator Anwar ul-Haq Kakar. In August, citizens took to the streets of large cities to protest against electricity bills and high prices, reaching 30-35% per month. The military authorities, behind the transitional government, took measures to curb the protests. This was easy to do, since political activists were frightened by the way the authorities dealt with participants in protests against the detention of I. Khan on May 9 of this year. Arsons by protesters and other acts of vandalism (especially damage to the military command post in Lahore, located in a historical building) led to the arrest of several hundred people, including the leadership of Imran's party. And the court sentenced him to three years in prison, depriving him of the opportunity to participate in the upcoming elections.

Another problem for the transitional cabinet is the deterioration of the situation in the border areas with Afghanistan and the growing tension in relations between Islamabad and Kabul.

Despite the measures taken by the military-civil authorities of Pakistan, the crisis cannot be overcome; it has affected the economy, society and political system of the country. Let's try to understand its reasons and consider possible ways out of this situation.

Materials and methods

The study is based on an analysis of materials reflecting the current political state of Pakistan. These are materials in the country's leading press organs, primarily in the Dawn and Tribune Express newspapers, articles by influential Pakistani analysts, public and political figures. Since the cause of the crisis lies in the economy, analytical and journalistic materials about the economy were used. The study examined the materials of the annual economic reviews prepared by the special services of the Ministry of Finance of Pakistan. The author relied on the results obtained by representatives of Russian oriental science S. S. Baranov [1], A.A.Kutsenkov [2], S.F.Levin [3], as well as Western (J.Brown [5]) and Pakistani by the authors (S.A.Zaidi [8], A.Siddiqui [7], I.Hussein [6]). The book "Pakistan: Beyond Stereotypes" [4] prepared by the Moscow Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies was used. The author used methods of analysis of macroeconomic parameters and methods of historical and social work.

Results

Conservative social policy and low savings base

The deep cause of the economic and political crisis lies, in our opinion, in the immutability of the ruling class and conservative social policy. The territory of present-day Pakistan was the agricultural outskirts of colonial India until 1947. Owners of large

plots of land, who lived, as a rule, in cities and managed their estates through servants and intermediaries, had a strong position among the propertied strata. Absenteeism landlords, or “feudal lords” as they are often called in Pakistan, emasculated the transformative, reformist component of land reforms carried out since the early 1950s. Of course, the situation in the village has changed compared to those times, but not dramatically. Unlike India, where the state was able to largely eliminate large land ownership [2], it remained in Pakistan’s agriculture, especially in the south of the Punjab province, in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan.

Owning land and real estate is a sign of belonging to the elite. This “disease” affects not only the traditional aristocracy, but also the highest ranks of the armed forces, which have humble social origins. The Pakistan Armed Forces, as a privileged corporation, has the right to 10% of public lands, which includes all land not already in private ownership. Receiving plots upon retirement, purchasing lots at auctions for the sale of land, where senior officers and generals enjoy benefits, turned the army elite into latifundists who manage their property following the example of “feudal lords”, i.e. exploiting the labor of poor, downtrodden, illiterate peasants.

The consequence of this social vice is low tax collection. The rates of land and water taxes have not changed for decades, having long ago become nominal, and the socio-political situation does not allow taxing the large incomes that land and livestock owners receive. The example of latifundists who do not replenish the state treasury is contagious, and in Pakistan it is customary to avoid paying taxes by all means, in particular using the corruption of tax officials. At different periods in the history of the state, the percentage of those paying direct taxes (on personal income) was no more than 1% of the population, and they amounted to 2–3% of GDP [6:380–382]

Pakistan’s economy is characterized by low levels of domestic savings and savings. Receipts from direct and indirect taxes, including customs duties and sales taxes, and other current contributions to the budget when compared to GDP do not exceed 7–9% (fell from 14–15% at the beginning of the century). According to this indicator, Pakistan ranks one of the last in the world and last among the countries of South Asia.

It is also impossible to compensate for the low level of domestic savings with an influx of foreign investment. Foreign direct investment is showing negative dynamics, and in terms of accumulated capital investment the country lags far behind India and even Bangladesh, which, before separating from Pakistan in 1971, was considered a hopelessly lagging province doomed to vegetation. The consequence of all this is low rates of economic growth and their decline, especially noticeable since the beginning of this century.

Relative deindustrialization

In 2000, Pakistan was ahead of India in per capita income, but now lags behind by more than a third. Its economy is often characterized as an example of “premature deindustrialization”: the service sector came to the fore too quickly, which now generates almost 60% of GDP in Pakistan, and just over 50% in Bangladesh and India. The industrial

sector in Pakistan accounts for less than 20% of newly added value, while its neighbors in South Asia account for more than 25%².

The structural distortion of the current Pakistani economy is obvious against the backdrop of the fact that at the beginning of the 21st century, less than half of GDP was created in the service sector, and the shares of the agricultural and industrial sectors were equal [8:4] As for the manufacturing industry, the leading industry remains textile and yarn production and fabrics made from local cotton. Its production is not growing, including due to a lack of demand from industry. And industry continues to stagnate, despite significant benefits provided to Pakistan by the European Union in the early 2000s and other external favorable circumstances.

The crisis also affected metallurgy and heavy engineering, which are basic to the economy. Built 1974–1985 With preferential Soviet aid, a large metallurgical plant near Karachi has not been operating since 2015 due to debts. Attempts to privatize it have failed, and on the site of the collapsing plant they are planning to establish a park of industrial enterprises designed for export.

The slow growth rate of Pakistani goods exports is considered to be one of the main reasons for macroeconomic problems. Reasons for Pakistan’s poor merchandise exports are unclear³. Apparently, the reasons lie in the social sphere, in the ways of organizing and managing the production process by private owners and the state. A negative role is played by the activities of lobbying groups, which ensure that industrialists and financial tycoons receive unjustified benefits and kickbacks to top officials. According to Miftah Ismail, who recently held the post of Minister of Finance of the country, all this is a direct robbery of the state budget, robbing the poor from the rich⁴.

Ossification of industrial oligarchy

One of Pakistan’s long-standing problems is the weakness of its industrial bourgeoisie. Some authors, prone to class analysis, believe that the dominant position in the country’s economy is occupied not by the bourgeoisie, but by the proto-bourgeoisie, i.e. an immature social stratum that has not yet become a true bourgeoisie. And in this they see fundamental differences between the Pakistani path of development and the Indian one. It is difficult to fully agree with this interpretation; there is some truth in it, since it takes into account the underdevelopment of the country’s industrial base, inherited from colonial times, and the lack of a tradition of investing in industrial assets among the country’s indigenous population.

The first industrialists who appeared at the turn of the 1940s and 50s were merchants and traders and almost exclusively consisted of immigrants from other regions of India [3].

² Asian Development Bank and Bangladesh. Asian Development Bank and India. Asian Development Bank and Pakistan. Fact Sheets. Available from: adv.org/publications/series/fact-sheets

³ Nekhoda A. Explaining Pakistan’s balance of payments crisis. Dawn, April 19 2023. Available from: dawn.com/article/1714456/explaining-pakistans-balance-of-payments-crisis

⁴ Miftah outlines problems afflicting economy. The Express Tribune October 18 2022. Available from: tribune.com.pk/story/2382082/miftah-outlines-problems-afflicting-economy

The resulting bourgeoisie, which did not belong to the main ethnic groups of the country, found itself in a monopoly position. Under the influence of government policy and favorable global conditions, commercial capital quickly transformed into industrial and financial capital, turning the first capital of the state, the port city of Karachi, rich and prosperous. With the assistance of government officials, immigrants, mainly from Bombay and the province of Gujarat bordering Sindh, established control over the young state's foreign trade and created its large manufacturing industry. Over the first two decades, they maintained their preferences through such state levers as regulation of exchange and foreign trade activities, seeking the sale to them at a preferential price of industrial capacities created in the public sector as part of the import substitution policy.

At first, barely perceptible blows to the monopoly position of the first generation of Pakistani industrialists were dealt by the military regime of M. Ayub Khan (1958–1969), who decided to move the capital from Karachi to Punjab, to the north of what was then West Pakistan. By this, he weakened the position of the foreign bourgeoisie, which was losing some of its close ties with the bureaucracy. But it suffered the most severe losses as a result of the collapse of the country in 1971, the separation of East Pakistan, in whose industry it had invested considerable capital [1].

The top of the first generation bourgeoisie suffered greatly from the nationalization campaign launched by Z.A.Bhutto in 1972–74. By taking the largest industrial enterprises and all major private banks and insurance companies into the public sector without compensation, the country's populist leader deprived many entrepreneurs of incentives to stay in the country and invest in its economy. The military regime of M.Zia-ul-Haq, which replaced the civilian one, gradually regained the trust of business circles, but among them groups of the local, "national" bourgeoisie, mainly Punjabi and partly Pashtun, already predominated. At the same time, a characteristic feature of both the first and second generations of industrialists is their clannishness, even casteism, and belonging to a trading environment local in genesis.

It is believed that since the 1980s. There were no significant changes in the structure of the Pakistani big bourgeoisie. She became ossified and withdrawn, keeping unchanged marriages between cousins and closed social communication (closed clubs, swimming pools, etc.). A book recently published by an Australian researcher suggests that the Pakistani bourgeoisie has remained isolated, poorly integrated into the international elite, which affects the lack of inclination for innovation and modern organizational and market solutions⁵.

The army in the economy, law enforcement and state security

The "pupation" of the bourgeois elite has led to the fact that since the beginning of the 1990s it does not play an independent role in political affairs. The last mass protest of

⁵ Khan S.A. Crazy rich Pakistanis. Dawn June 24 2020. Available from: dawn.com/article/6657230/crazy-rich-pakistanis.

stockbrokers, clerks of private institutions and other market representatives occurred in 1993 in defense of Prime Minister-entrepreneur Nawaz Sharif, removed from power by the military. At the same time, the Pakistani armed forces themselves are conducting active economic activities. Private corporations founded by the Armed Forces, the Fauji Army Foundation, the Army Charitable Trust, the Bahria Naval Foundation and the Shaheen Air Force, in addition to charitable purposes (providing pensions and subsidies to retired and serving military personnel) pursue and completely commercial tasks: increasing capital, increasing profits, increasing the efficiency of investments. Among private firms, the military occupies a prominent place. Unlike other state-owned enterprises, these firms are usually not inefficient; this is achieved through special benefits and privileges, that is, non-market methods that do not contribute to the dynamic development of the corporate economy [7: 219–242].

Pakistan's armed forces have achieved considerable success. The political and military leadership managed to create a large and effective military-industrial complex, which made it possible to sell weapons abroad worth billions of dollars a year. The military has also created an impressive nuclear potential, aimed, according to the Pakistani nuclear doctrine, "to contain India." Although, according to Russian analysts, Pakistan's main trump card in this case is not so much the threat of using nuclear weapons, but rather "well-trained, highly professional general-purpose forces that have extensive and varied combat experience" [4:145].

The army has been fighting terrorists for the past two decades. The number of dead and wounded military personnel is in the tens of thousands. After some lull in the second half of the 2010s, the situation in the border provinces, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa deteriorated again. This is due to the re-coming to power in Afghanistan of the Taliban* movement and the terrorist attacks carried out by the forces of the Pakistani Taliban located on Afghan soil and opposed to Islamabad.

The intensification of terrorists affected not only the border areas, but also Karachi, which remains the largest industrial and financial center, the number of residents of which has exceeded 20 million people. Afghan refugees, including the Taliban, and Pashtuns who migrated from the north-west of the country play a significant role in the life of this metropolis. Among them, mafia and gangster formations control the bulk of the road transport business; their positions are strong in operations for the sale and resale of land and real estate. The heyday of criminal Taliban-Pashtun groups occurred in the early 2010s, but even now they influence the situation in the city, which scares off investors.

Calculation of foreign investments and debt loop

Pakistani and especially foreign experts see a way out of the economic crisis in improving the climate for investment and "doing business." All the numerous assistance programs for Pakistan, which were regularly adopted by the IMF and other international financial institutions: the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, etc., were designed for this. Agreements on the last two IMF "bankruptcy rescue" programs of \$6.7 and \$6.0 billion

were concluded in 2014 and 2019, but their implementation was accompanied by great difficulties. The implementation of the three-year program-2019 was especially difficult. In 2021, after disbursing approximately \$3 billion in several tranches, the IMF began to delay the disbursement of funds, demanding that Pakistan fulfill the conditions included in the program and evidence of progress made on them. In the summer of 2023, after much delay and numerous consultations, the Fund decided to allocate the remaining \$3 billion to Pakistan, which it must use within 9 months⁶. The provision of these funds, which are not too large for Pakistan, is carried out against the state's quota for special drawing rights and is in itself important as a sign of confidence in it; it facilitates obtaining external loans and attracting foreign investment.

In anticipation of this decision, Pakistan's civil-military leadership unveiled plans for overcoming the crisis. As part of institutional reforms, the creation of a Special Investment Facilitation Council was announced. The council, which includes the leaders of the Armed Forces and the government, is vested with extraordinary powers to combat bureaucratic red tape and corruption and is called upon to coordinate efforts to attract investment in the country's economy. Unlike the situation in the mid-2010s, when the main hopes were placed on the assistance of China, now the emphasis is on supporting the Arab states of Arabia and the Gulf. Pakistan expects that four states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Bahrain are added) will provide investments of \$20–25 billion, and ideally after some time up to \$28 billion⁷. The military, represented by Chief of Army Staff General Asif Munir, also joined the government's efforts. In exchange for help, Pakistan is ready to give the Arab "brothers" permission to create modern farms for breeding livestock (camels, horses) and poultry (bustards), and construct tourist and entertainment facilities. Industrial projects are also planned: oil refining, exploration of rare earth minerals, technological development of the entire southern belt of Pakistan from the Thar and Cholistan deserts in the east to the borders with Iran in the west⁸.

Loans already taken could lead Pakistan into a debt trap. This has already happened to our regional neighbor, the Republic of Sri Lanka. Both states, using loans from the IMF and other Western lending organizations to cover current expenses, rely primarily on the assistance of the PRC for investment purposes. As part of the agreement to build the ambitious China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, Pakistan already owes China more than \$25 billion, and the total debt to Beijing is about a third of its total external debt - more than \$120 billion (in the mid-2010s . it was equal to \$66 billion)

The danger of falling into a debt loop frightens Pakistani ruling circles. Hence the desire to diversify the flow of borrowed funds and use opportunities to develop beneficial relationships with all counterparties. Among them, one of the first places is Russia, trade, economic and political contacts with which have been strengthened in recent years.

⁶ Pakistan, IMF reach staff-level pact on crucial \$ 3 billion bailout. The Express Tribune. June 30 2023. Available from: [tribune.com.pk/story/2424156/pakistan-imf-reach-stafflevel-pact-on-crucial-\\$3-billion-bailout](https://tribune.com.pk/story/2424156/pakistan-imf-reach-stafflevel-pact-on-crucial-$3-billion-bailout)

⁷ Pakistan opens gates for Gulf investment. The Express Tribune July 29 2023. Available from: tribune.com.pk/story/2381293/pakistan=opens=gates-for-gulf-investment

⁸ Army chief vows to steer country out of crisis. Dawn July 25 2023. Available from: dawn.com/news/1766652/army-chief-vows-to-steer-country-out-of-crisis

Conclusion

Overcoming the socio-economic crisis in Pakistan can be expected only after some time, most likely after general elections are held in the country and the start of a stable functioning government that enjoys the trust and favor of the military corporation. Since the deep causes of the crisis situation lie in social policy, it was in changing it that the most significant results could be expected. But one cannot count on them, since there are no signs of change in the sociopolitical sphere. The pressure on the left is exceptionally weak. Even the author of an article in the British Labor magazine, who is sympathetic to the left, writes about this [5]. In fact, only reformist measures are possible, which the IMF and other international institutions are calling on Pakistan⁹. These are reforms such as: a tax on the income of large owners of land and real estate, increasing the collection of taxes on profits and excess profits, the fight against illegal business, smuggling and drug trafficking. Such actions, although their need is fully understood by representatives of the middle strata and ruling circles, are difficult to implement due to the influence of the lobby, which protects the interests of a small number of extremely wealthy people. It is not easy to solve the problem of low growth rates and cuts in government spending, since this requires reducing allocations for defense, state security and internal order, which for the ruling corporation would be an encroachment on its interests.

Therefore, disasters and cataclysms are likely to grow. Pakistan is one of the countries most exposed to risks from global climate change. The increasing frequency of destructive natural disasters testifies to this. The environmental situation (lack of water, air pollution in cities) and constant demographic growth are problems that threaten social upheaval and instability.

The state has only one prospect – further inclusion in the system of regional and world relations. On this path, it is likely that part of the country will be developed for its own purposes by China and the Arab states of the Middle East, primarily Saudi Arabia. Pakistan will find itself at the epicenter of the struggle between the two informal leaders of the modern world, the USA and China. The growing contradictions between China and India and the possibility of acute conflicts associated with the pan-Islamic ideology of the Taliban will complicate the situation.

But a more favorable scenario cannot be ruled out. Scientific, technical and technological progress determines the evolution of human civilization. In certain countries and regions it manifests itself in the development of information technology. Pakistan did not stand aside. In recent years, the country has developed an IT sector that employs a young, well-trained workforce. Some of them are women working from home. The large number of young people makes Pakistan an attractive investment destination for international capital. The activity of local entrepreneurs and "freelancers" who are founding successful "start-up" companies is also growing. A major role is played by the rapidly growing Pakistani

⁹ IMF chief urges Pakistan to tax the rich, protect the poor. Dawn September 21 2023. Available from: dawn.com/news/1777063/imf-urges-pakistan-to-tax-the-rich-protect-the-poor

diaspora, living both in the Near and Middle East, as well as in the USA and Europe, primarily in England. Technological progress, capable of moving social rigidity and political inertia from a dead point, gives hope for a way out of the severe crisis in which Pakistan finds itself at the current stage of its development.

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